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ABSTRACT

To develop students' abilities in independent literary interpretation and thus to foster in them a deeper enjoyment and appreciation of literature, teachers should attempt to impart an understanding of three basic structural areas in literature. The first of these is an awareness of man in relation to his physical, social, and cultural environment--how characters are affected by and how they react to the obvious and subtle factors present in their surroundings. The second area is an understanding of the various levels of meaning in a work, from the simplest level of plot, to the devices and techniques employed to express tone, symbolic meaning and theme. Finally, a familiarity with form and genre--specifically, an appreciation of how the artist selects and structures the events and ideas he wishes to convey--is essential for increasing the students' analytical literary expertise. (MF)

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Approaches to Meaning: A Basis for a Literature Curriculum

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Environment, levels of meaning, genre—a curriculum based on these three areas of study is this writer's concern. Mr. Hillocks is the Director of the Project English Demonstration Center at Euclid Central Junior High School, Euclid, Ohio.

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By the time the average student enters junior high school he has very nearly attained all the skill in reading he will need to glean the content of his daily newspaper, his magazines, and whatever other popular literature he may encounter. His basic sight vocabulary has been long established, and he does not block on unfamiliar words. He can read for main ideas and important details and can make simple inferences about what he reads. In junior and senior high school, many curricula, if they focus on skills at all, simply proliferate what has already been learned and frequently, in a zealous attempt to force the student to read with care, add the skill of reading for unimportant details. This writer once witnessed a test on *The Scarlet Letter* containing fifty questions, such as "What was the name of Hester's jailer?"

In curricula such as these the real problems of meaning are either ignored or handled by the teacher in a series of lectures abstracted from his college or graduate school notes. The student is not only deprived of an opportunity to interpret meaning for himself, but is under the necessity of adhering to the interpretation suggested by the teacher. Thus the student soon believes that the meaning of a poem or story is akin to the secrets of ancient religions, closely guarded by a high priesthood in the innermost sanctum of a stone temple far from the view of the peasant world. The student is content to listen to the interpretations of the priesthood, and after years of acclimation to this procedure he is revolted by any unorthodox priest who may ask him questions without ever answering them. And new priests brought up in this tradition develop guilt complexes if they do not systematically present the predigested daily interpretation.

What is it then that leads the teacher to believe that he and his colleagues, but not the students, are capable of dealing with problems of meaning and interpretation? Is it that students are innately incapable of interpretation? Is it that below a certain level of "maturity" a student is unable to cope with problems of meaning? Or is it simply that the student does not possess the techniques for making systematic inquiry into meaning because he has never been exposed to a systematic approach to problems of meaning? The studies of reading difficulty have largely confined themselves to elementary school material and define difficulty by sentence length and vocabulary. One publication purports to teach inference skills by arranging problems in a planned sequence of easy to difficult; however, the simplicity or difficulty is not in the inference itself but in the relative familiarity of vocabulary items or in the relative abstractness of the concept. Does a curriculum deal adequately with meaning and the interpretation of literature if it simply increases the difficulty of vocab-

ulary and the abstractness of the material? Most teachers will agree that this alone is not adequate.

Why Read Literature?

As certain words in the titles of literature anthologies suggest, the major goal in reading is adventure, fun, or good times. No one will argue that these are not laudable goals, but unfortunately they are goals that can be achieved by the student with much less effort in media other than books and magazines: movies, television, radio, and comics. The difficulty lies not so much in the goal itself as in the apparent failure of the ardent proponents of reading interest and good times to realize that the great pleasure and reward of reading comes through the revelation which an author makes through his craft and because of his genius. But to grasp the revelation fully, the reader cannot remain passive and demand entertainment; on the contrary, he must interact with the work; he must read and think creatively. Through this process he will be both entertained and illuminated, and he will know the pleasure of accomplishment.

How can the student be taught to understand the meaning of a literary work whether it be in print or produced on stage or in the movies? What tools or concepts must he, as an educated reader, have acquired? Jerome Bruner in *The Process of Education* suggests that the structure of the subject matter should be central to our teaching. He assumes that learning structure is more important than learning details, because a knowledge of structure can be transferred from one problem-solving situation to another. If Bruner's assumption is correct and if literature has a discoverable structure, it should be possible to teach that structure, thereby giving the student an invaluable tool for the continuation of his literary education beyond the formal school situation.

In literature three structural areas present themselves immediately. The first deals with the picture of man produced by a writer, the second with levels of meaning, and the third with form and genre. Familiarity with the concepts of each of these areas will provide the reader with a background and an awareness for making complex inferences and for asking himself the kinds of questions whose answers reveal a fullness of meaning.

I. *Man in his Environment*. The serious writer is concerned with the relationship of man to his environment, which for the sake of simplification can be separated into three foci—the physical, the social, and the cultural environments. In reality, of course, these three are inseparable, each contributing to and interacting with the others to form a matrix of influences which operate dynamically in influencing the character, desires, and aspirations of man. Since the author's task involves a commentary on man, his work necessarily involves the relationship of man to his environment —a relationship which may be seen lying somewhere in the continuum extending from man as controller of his environment, as in the case of the mythic protagonist in tales such as the Promethean story, to man as subject of his environment, as in the case of the modern protagonist in works such as *Death of a Salesman*. No character in any work can be completely abstracted from his setting, for even the values of the mythical hero who is basically in command of his environment are influenced by it.

In many instances the full understanding of a work requires an acquaintance with the organization of environment. A reader unaware of class distinctions and the functioning of status will miss the full irony of a poem as simple as "Richard Cory." A failure to understand the influence of culture and to realize that a culture imposes a set of values on

its members which may not be appropriate to the members of another culture leads to a lack of sympathy for a character such as Wang Lung in *The Good Earth* and to a failure to identify the cultural struggle integral to *The Light in the Forest*. When we say that a student is not mature enough to read a particular book or poem or to see a play, perhaps we actually mean that there are certain concepts involved in the work with which he is unfamiliar and that his ignorance of these will impede or preclude his comprehension. Many of the concepts which give rise to difficulty, among them those of environment, can be taught systematically.

Arbitrary separation of the areas comprising the concept of environment simplifies analysis, promotes understanding, and facilitates teaching. At the same time, however, it is essential that we realize the inseparability of the physical, cultural, and social aspects of environment.

A. *The Physical Environment:* A teaching unit focusing on the physical environment might examine a series of problems such as the following which develop concepts centering in man and his relationship to the physical world. (1) How does man react and adjust to his physical surroundings? (2) What abilities, physical and psychological, enable man to adapt to conditions of privation and to conditions imposed by location—jungle, desert, mountain, sea, farm, and city? (3) What psychological effects do isolation and physical torment have on man? (4) Why do the effects of similar experiences vary from one individual to another? (5) How does exposure to various physical conditions influence the growth of character or personality? More complex problems arise when the focus changes to that part of the physical world which is man's own creation. It is this part of the physical environment which is so frequently the subject of the literature of protest: slum conditions, intolerable working conditions, economic oppression.

From a different point of view, man's concepts of nature bear examination. Primitive man sees nature as a force upon whose good will he is dependent, whereas modern man views it as a challenge which he must meet to prove his integrity. At the same time man has viewed nature as a refuge where the rights of the individual are unmolested and where the soul can reconstitute its vital powers for renewed contact with the world of men and affairs.

B. *The Social Environment:* Man is a social animal. No systematic attempt to understand the human element in literature can ignore this fact. As has already been suggested, knowledge of certain facts basic to social organization is fundamental to the full comprehension of some works and helpful in the comprehension of others. For instance, some knowledge of class stratification, mobility from class to class, and the effects of status and power in social situations will greatly facilitate the understanding of novels such as Galsworthy's *The Man of Property*. Not that the terminology or concepts need be objectified for the mature reader, but the word "mature" implies the ability to comprehend and be sensitive to the distinctions of status, power, and wealth which shape the lives of people as well as literary characters. The "mature" reader has had enough experience to enable him to understand. The problem is that for too many people even the fact of experience fails to be useful in reading or observing. Why? We do not know, but we do know that professors of English feel compelled to explain the meanings of novels like *The Great Gatsby* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to their students. I once asked two classes of college freshmen, on the basis of their having read *Huck Finn*, whether they thought Mark Twain was in favor of, or opposed to, slavery. Three of the fifty-seven stated that he was opposed to it. The rest felt that he

favored it. Later in the year I questioned them on *The Great Gatsby*. Two-thirds of the students failed to see any social ramifications at all. The excuse could not be that they were too young, for they ranged in age from eighteen to fifty-five.

Problems of social class are reflected in the work of many writers, even to some extent in Odysseus's battle with the intruders who upset the social balance in making their bid for Penelope. But by the nineteenth century, social class had become a major theme in the novels of Dickens in England and of Zola in France. The conflict existing between the members of various social classes or between the individual and the class system is of course a persistent and dominant theme of many modern novels, plays, and poems.

If a reader brings some knowledge of class structure and dynamics to his reading, he will better understand and infer the concepts which the writer leaves unexplained, but which may be basic to his thesis.

C. *The Cultural Environment:* Man's cultural milieu may be distinguished from the social as the composite of all the forces which cut across social boundaries to delimit the behavior of an individual and to organize patterns of behavior for the whole society. For a given society the class system is operative within the boundaries of the various cultural forces which influence it. Much of the behavior of an individual is determined by the culture into which he is born. Superficial cultural patterns, such as habits of eating and dress, are obvious; but cultural patterns which are the basis for modes of thought are, to the outsider, neither obvious nor acceptable. The idea of progress, for instance, which pervades Western civilization is not accepted in many Far Eastern cultures. Many Orientals are so accustomed to hardship, suffering, and death that their outlook is fatalistic. The religions of a culture frequently oppose technical and material change and teach acceptance of things as they are. Some Protestant sects preach the acceptance of all worldly ills as punishment coming from God. Buddhists preach a similar acceptance.

Cultural conditioning is reflected in all literary works, but especially in those dealing with cultural change or cultural conflict; e.g. Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth*, Conrad Richter's *The Light in the Forest*, E. M. Forster's *Passage to India*, Alan Paton's *Too Late the Phalarope* and *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Whatever the institutions existing in a given culture, an individual born into the culture is influenced by them and influences them. His adherence to the ideals of the culture is rewarded; his digressions from its standards are punished. When an individual moves from one culture to another, he will be caught in a conflict of customs and values, as is Trueson in *The Light in the Forest*. Here a white child, indoctrinated into an American Indian culture, is transplanted into the white culture to which he is unable to adjust. His customs and values are not the same as those of the other whites. When a culture changes, even minutely, new customs and mores must be learned, and this is often difficult for older generations, as it is for Wang Lung in *The Good Earth*. Most individuals adhere to the standards of the various institutions in which they are involved; but when they depart from them or when they are in conflict with them, they will be punished by official or unofficial social disapproval.

A knowledge of culture as a determining factor which influences the behavior and thought of the individual and which differentiates the behavior and thought of individuals living in various cultures supplies a background from which the reader is able to infer the cultural forces active in any specific fictional, dramatic, or poetic work and tends to create a sympathy for cultural values different from those of the reader.

II. *Levels of Meaning.* The concept that meaning exists in a literary work on multiple levels is a very useful one, if used within the condition that no one meaning can be totally isolated from the other levels of meaning within the work. No abstraction, no precis, no analysis can ever represent more than a fraction of the total meaning contained in the work itself. But if we are to deal with meaning and to communicate about meanings, it is essential to deal in abstractions concerning the kinds of meaning involved in a story, poem, novel, or drama.

Levels of Meaning

Because of the impossibility of extracting a particular level of meaning from the matrix of meaning in which it appears, any attempt to describe levels of meaning must necessarily deal with tendencies rather than absolutes and ignore overlappings for the sake of general distinctions.

The first and most obvious level of meaning may be called the plot or literal level, at which things happen, whether the events and agents are represented as real or not. Here the reader is involved with understanding events, cause and effect, relationships among characters and between the character and his physical, social, and cultural environment. The reader is concerned with identifying the referents, real or imaginary, which the words, as signs or elementary symbols represent, individually or in combination.

In the literary work, how does an author achieve levels of significance beyond plot level? Perhaps it is better to phrase the question differently: Through what devices or techniques do levels of meaning become noticeable? To some extent such devices may be described in terms of a hierarchy, extending from the base of tone and metaphor to the universal symbols of archetype.

Tone is used to achieve secondary levels of meaning, especially in satire. In satire of the formal variety, the satirist, whether the author or a character of his creation, pronounces stinging diatribes and harangues against the targets of his wrath. In this kind of satire the objects of criticism and the reasons for criticism are quite apparent. In more subtle satire, in which irony is the chief instrument of the satirist, the criticism is not always self-evident, and the burden of interpretation is left to the reader. In ironic statements the reader must understand the contrast between what is implied and the reverse. He must understand that the criticism suggests implied good in contrast to what is directly stated as good because of the system of values adopted by men but disapproved by the author. Even in a relatively simple poem like Southey's "Battle of Blenheim," the implied criticism of war and of man's tendency to gloss over the cruelty and suffering in war and to recall only the romantic glory which feeds his vanity is not immediately obvious to the reader but must be inferred. To the experienced reader the inference is simple, but the young reader may fail completely to make it. There is no direct statement of criticism, simply the children's comments on the cruelty of war and the bland assertion of the old man that "'twas a famous victory." The reader must infer that the children are right, that the old man's statement is typical of the attitude of mankind, and that man cares for the glory of war more than he does about its destruction.

In the case of exaggeration, the process of interpretation is much simpler. The author simply carries vices and foibles to their logical extremes, a technique which in itself suggests standards of conduct which the author approves.

At the level of allegorical symbol, the reader is presented with a relatively rigid symbol, the significance of which can readily be grasped by the reader. For instance, in a medieval morality play,

Gluttony might be represented by a fat man riding a hog across the stage holding a bottle of wine in one hand and a side of bacon in the other. This symbol is largely conventional, making use of obesity in man, a conventional animal symbol, and the equipage of gluttony. Other equally rigid symbols in allegory may not make use of convention, but may depend upon the context of the total allegory for their meaning. For instance, in the fable, "The Fox and the Grapes," the symbol of the fox must be interpreted in the light of his desire for the grapes, his attempt to obtain them, his failure, and his ultimate rejection of them as sour.

Generally in this kind of allegory, in addition to the rigidity of the symbol, there is what can be called a one-to-one relationship between symbol and referent. The man on the hog and the fox represent single concepts. This does not exclude the possibility of two or more levels of allegory existing side by side, as in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, where Gloriana represents both the virgin mother at the religious level and Queen Elizabeth at the historical level. At each level the one-to-one relationship still exists. Furthermore, in medieval allegory there is a tendency for each event, object, and agent to be symbolic and for each symbol to be related to each other in a direct and clear manner.

In contrast to the allegorical symbol, the symbols in such works as *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* tend to be less rigid and to represent a syndrome of meaning. They may or may not be related to other symbols in the same work, and every event, object, and agent in the work is not necessarily symbolic. To suggest that a symbol of this type represents a single idea is to be guilty of oversimplification. To say that Moby Dick represents evil and the Mariner represents a repentant sinner is to ignore the ramifications of both. Such symbols ordinarily do not depend upon public acceptance of conventional symbolic values; rather the symbol is developed throughout the context of the work as the author suggests symbolic meaning through the interplay of various elements in his work.

The value of the archetype or universal symbol depends neither upon local convention nor upon the author's manipulation of his material; rather, its meaning is dependent upon its universal recurrence in the life patterns of mankind. Such symbols seem to arise out of the basic needs, desires, and experiences common to all men of all cultures. The most famous archetype, that of death and rebirth, which Maud Bodkin tells us is present in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and which other critics have seen in other works, is central to all of the great and many of the minor religions. Many archetypes figure most prominently in myth where we find those of the birth of the hero; the pattern of his journey, task, and return; the crone who refurbishes the powers of the hero; and the mother goddess.

Finally, we arrive at a level of meaning which must be understood as all of the foregoing phases or levels: the theme. At this level the reader is concerned with the interplay of plot, tone, symbol and archetype—with the full meaning of a work. This does not imply that one can deal adequately with plot, tone, and symbol individually without reference to the entire context. It means simply that any consideration of theme necessitates consideration of all elements of the work.

The foregoing analysis is too brief to be complete and too simple to be thorough. Nevertheless, it may serve as an outline, the details and complexities of which can be elaborated on from conventional sources of critical theory.

Importance of Symbols

Although it is obvious that tone and symbol convey a heavy burden of meaning in literary works, the particular

meaning implied by tone or suggested by symbols in any one work is not always obvious. To the unpracticed reader even an obvious allegory may be obscure in details of its implications; the same reader, while reading for plot, will be completely unaware of more subtle symbolic content, and he will reject a work as incomprehensible when its meaning is the function of complex symbols. An English curriculum, the objective of which is to teach students how to read literature, must make the student aware of the existence of symbols, help him to explore the ways in which they function, and give him practice in interpretation. Such a curriculum might begin with the examination of simple fables and parables and move gradually toward the interpretation of complex symbolic poetry. At each step the curriculum should induce the student to re-examine previously developed concepts in the light of new ones, should offer him increasingly difficult works to interpret, and should permit him greater independence in his interpretation.

III. *Form and Genre.* The shape and/or form of a work contributes meaning to the work or controls the meaning of the work in special ways, so that the consideration of form in general and of forms in particular becomes a necessary part of the curriculum in literature. *Form* in general is that which any artist imposes upon experience during the process of composing—the selection and arrangement of events and ideas. The general form of a work may be tight and restricted, observing the classical unities of space, time, and action, concentrating on the events of a moment as they have arisen from the past and will project into the future; or the general form may be loose and sprawling, presenting a panoramic view of man as he confronts the problems of his existence. *Form* in the particular sense refers to those generic forms which can be defined and differentiated on the basis of both structure and subject matter. Genre will be used to designate form in the particular sense in which tragedy, epic, comedy, formal verse satire, pastoral, and the epigram are forms.

Because a particular work may exhibit a form which other works do not possess, form in the general sense can be examined only in relation to specific works. It is possible, of course, to compare the effects of similar forms and to contrast the effects of differing forms. The compact structure of *Oedipus Rex,* for instance, has the effect of driving the attention to the immediate, central problems of the play: man's role in creating his own destiny, his struggle against it, and his submission to it. The whole impact of these problems is conveyed through the figure of Oedipus. The other characters, as it were, are only *dramatis personae*, the machinery for staging the events of the play and the emotions of the man. Oedipus, on the other hand, is the *dramatis sapientia*, the purveyor of emotion, idea, and theme. More specifically, the steps of the plot by which Oedipus seeks and learns the truth about himself thrust home the ineluctable nature of his fate.

Dostoyevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* is closely structured, but in a different way, and this difference in structure helps to achieve different effects. The central plot line moves directly from consideration of the crime through commission, suffering, and punishment. The major themes and interest center in Raskolnikov and the workings of his morbidly introspective and philosophical mind. The themes of crime and its casuistry, of moral responsibility, and of human depravity and dignity find their primary expression in Raskolnikov. But in contrast to *dramatis personae* of *Oedipus Rex,* the characters of *Crime and Punishment* are important in themselves as well as in the development and variation of the major themes of the book. A number of characters commit

"crimes," but some are depraved and some are not. Through the secondary characters Dostoyevsky explores a number of related themes including the causes and effects of "crimes" committed out of helplessness, necessity, egotism, and depravity. Thus the moral questions raised in the book exceed those raised in *Oedipus Rex* not only in number, but in precision. *Oedipus Rex* raises large questions. *Crime and Punishment* raises large questions and proceeds to refine by raising smaller, related questions.

Form in the particular sense, in the sense of genre, concerns not only the shape of the work but the prototypes of the characters and the tone of the interaction of both shape and character. In classic formal verse satire, for instance, the main character appoints himself critic and pursues his course cursing and denouncing all the ills of his society. Even in his self-righteousness, however, his scurrilous condemnation of what he designates as evil as he moves from one social class to another and from one physical location to another, reflects something base in his own nature—something which finds a certain depraved pleasure in bringing to light and condemning vileness. This seems to be true in varying degrees of most formal verse satire of the classical period and of some English satire.

Holden Caulfield of *The Catcher in the Rye* has much in common with the satirist. The major difference is that Holden does not consciously see himself as a satirist. He scorns and abuses the things around him but fails to recognize that he himself is a part of the very smuttiness he scorns. Huck Finn also serves as a satirist but not at all in the classical sense. On the contrary Huck hardly ever abuses the society around him, and when he does, his abuse is directed only toward specific, obvious charlatans such as the King or the Duke. Through most of the novel the general charlatanism of the age escapes him.

At the beginning of the story Huck sees himself as generally inferior as do the other characters. Later on when he confronts the problem of whether or not to help Jim, he sees his decision to help the slave as a confirmation of his own moral depravity. Yet Huck remains the vehicle of Twain's satire, but satire of a different sort than that of formal verse satire. Irony is Twain's most powerful weapon, and he uses it as a skilled swordsman uses a rapier. The most famous example, of course, is Huck's decision to help Jim and "go to hell." Huck knows Christians and knows what good Christians would do—send Jim back to slavery. But Huck, as usual, cannot force himself to make a man suffer. Huck's belief that he will go to hell for exercising charity and brotherly love is a condemnation of the hypocrisy of his society as surely as if he had denounced it openly. Throughout the book Huck acts with charity and compassion, and throughout the book he is regarded as uncivilized because he ignores social forms. By the end of the story Huck has discovered the irreconcilable opposition between ethic and behavior, between what is preached and what is practiced. The only move left for him is to "light out for the territories."

Thus in many ways Huck is like the classical satirist with the important difference of his naivete—his inability to understand man's inhumanity to man. He never sinks to the level of those around him as Holden Caulfield nearly does. Huck sees himself as the one at fault, acts according to his conscience, and rises above the baseness and petty actions of men. For this reason, although we smirk with a satirist but cannot love him, we can love Huckleberry Finn.

So much has been written by scholars concerning the charactistics of the major genres—epic, tragedy, comedy, satire, elegy, pastoral—that to present their formal characteristics here would be unnecessary and pretentious. The point for the teacher and the curriculum builder

has been made: a knowledge of genres illuminates literary meaning.

Three Areas for Study

A curriculum based on these three areas—environment, levels of meaning, and genre—would of necessity introduce the least complex and abstract concepts first. Students who possess the basic reading skills can examine man's relationship to his physical environment as it appears in short stories, poems, and longer works of fiction and biography. Other units might focus on the courageous and just man. Beyond these, units concerned with man in the process of becoming and with man in relation to other men (as family member, as outcast, and as leader) will lead to a careful examination of man in his society and of man in his culture.

The simple aspects of symbolism can be taught to bright students effectively as early as the seventh grade. Beginning with a discussion and analysis of the meanings and uses of conventional symbols, the students can move to the interpretation of simple fables and parables or other simple allegories, the symbols of which are rigid and singular, involving only a one-to-one relationship between symbol and the thing symbolized. Later the symbols with which a student works can become increasingly less rigid and more complex while the clues which an author offers for interpretation can become fewer and fewer. The student will eventually be ready to deal with a spectrum of allegory, ranging from a work like *Everyman*, in which there is a maximum of clues for interpretation, to a work like *The Four Quartets*, in which clues are at a minimum. For the average student, however, the abstraction of objectified work with levels of meaning would be delayed until the ninth grade.

Students of superior intellectual ability can examine genre well before the average student. There are three reasons for this. First, the idea of genre is abstract. Second, if the teaching is to be done inductively, the complexity of the major genres demands that a number of ideas be dealt with simultaneously. Third, the materials which compose the classical genres are often difficult reading in themselves. The average student might deal with simple genre-like forms, comparing and contrasting plot, character, setting, tone, and moral universe. But any careful consideration of the classical genre should probably be withheld until the ninth or tenth grade, at which time aspects of comedy and satire might be introduced. The other genres can follow later, depending, of course, upon the depth in which they are examined, the fineness of the discriminations demanded, the sophistication of the student, and the care with which the particular unit of work is structured.

These three areas—environment, levels of meaning, and genre—provide the basis for a curriculum which, as a concomitant of good teaching, ought to produce not merely readers who read with comprehension in the conventional sense, but readers who are able to focus a multitude of concepts from a variety of sources upon a single work—readers who take much to a work and glean more from it. Their reading will not be a linear movement from one book to another but a pyramidal synthesis of all their reading.

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